

THE HALFWAY HOUSE

BY MARY HEATON VORSE

DAVID ELLISON agreed with towns so little that he escaped from them early. Towns, he said, made him think of worms' nests, a writhing, weaving horror, the members bound together by a common rapacity. Though what he said was not just to the coast villages. These towns cannot escape the imminent tragedy of the sea nor the splendid austerity of the unconquerable seacoast which, in some parts, has not given man a foothold since the Pilgrims first made their adventurous landing.

These towns breed brave men and women, and occasionally a lad like David Ellison grows up, who seems to be kin to the sea and to the lonely and savage coast.

He escaped to the coast guards. He could not take the outward-bound course like his forefathers on the open sea, on account of his mother. The sea had claimed already too many of the Ellisons. Up over Town Hill in the old cemetery there was a lot where one after another the Ellisons' tombstones were marked with the words, "Lost at Sea."

The men of the coast guards are an odd people, when you come to think of it, and a queer kind of life they live; their thoughts are forever concentrated on the sea and on the vessels moving over the surface of the sea. The men who have grown old in the service are both grave and friendly; they sense things other people do not perceive; they have a knowledge of storms and a way of being able to know the shapes of vessels which to common eyes are only undistinguishable spots on the horizon.

All night long the men guard the coast and inform the stations of the fates of vessels. By day the men sit looking out

to sea; they are isolated as though they were on board ship. Sand, sky, sea, and the vessels sailing the sea bound their lives. Many stations are in distant places, hard to get at; they are joined to the life of the towns only by a narrow road running through soft marsh and wind-swept forest and moorland.

These are the shores haunted by ghosts of dead ships and the dead men who sailed in them. There is the legend of a white stallion, sole survivor of a wrecked vessel, that ran wild for years on the dunes, and that, after he was trapped, freed himself and ran back into the sea whence he came. There are legends of wrecks and stories of wreckers and smugglers to be heard at the life-saving stations; stories of miraculous escapes and of mysterious vessels sailing along safely, but with no hand at the rudder.

Nor are all these stories of yesterday. The mystery of the rose is a story of this generation; everyone has heard David Ellison's story and that of Assunta Flores. The rose is still blooming in the sparse earth on Spinet Rock Light, where Mary Angus was raised.

David's station was in Gurnet Reef Hollow, a part of the coast known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. This coast is strewn with bones of dead ships; a sand cliff borders the ocean, and every now and then, at some great storm, the sea breaks in through the sand barrier and hurls inland the wreck of a vessel, and in time the shifting sand buries it and perhaps uncovers it again before the eyes of some other generation.

The towns of this wild country border the bay. The back country comes to their very gardens—an impenetrable

tract of marsh, heath, and woodland, after that the cruel and encroaching dunes. Back country, dunes, and sea are all of them untamed; all of them exist to-day as in the beginning.

David grew up with them, knowing which dune had shifted under the fury of the winter's winds and which hollow was filling, and where the forests were being eaten by the sinister sands. He loved the savage coast that was forever untamable by man's hand.

Nothing broke the harmonious procession of his days, not even love. For love didn't come to David in a scorching flame. He fell in love as one breathes. He was so long Mary Angus's friend that he didn't know he had love in his heart for her until it blossomed between them.

Mary Angus was the only girl David had ever known well, and to others she was as inaccessible as a princess in a fairy tale. Spinnet Rock was her father's Light, a second-class Light, a white light of a thirty-two flash, own cousin to great Highhead Light, except in magnitude. She was born in the Light, and she tended the Light from the time she was a baby.

If there was a girl that seemed predestined to be a mate to David it was Mary, with her smooth hair so blond that it seemed almost silver in the sun, and a flush of honey-colored tan across her face, and her swift ways like a bird, and her capable hands.

It wasn't but a few weeks after they had found out they cared for each other and decided to marry that David was coming along from Spinnet Rock Light to the station; his time off just took him there and back easily, and gave him an hour with Mary.

All the afternoon the sea had been an almost intolerable blue and the horizon cut by a low fog bank—there it had stayed and had not moved; light clouds scurried overhead on some upper strata of wind, scurried and flowed as though afraid of a coming storm, and after it had passed over the face of the dune it

had stained it with scudding lavender shadows. The sun plunged down red behind the cloud bank. By the time David passed Dead Man's Bar station it had set. The sea was lavender and the sky through the scudding clouds looked pale and high.

David got to the halfway house when a torn fog wraith tore past him; it enveloped him and the world and sped on, as though some one had torn a cloud with hands and cast it from him; little clouds of fog flew through the bayberry bushes and over sad-colored Mary's-flower that at this place clothed the face of the sand in sparse patches. He could see the fog advancing in a barrier, preceded by the wind-blown fog wraiths; he could see the fog wraiths racing inland like frightened creatures, shutting out the dunes. He walked along rapidly. All the world now shut away from him and now opened up before him. The fog had come on in a strange fashion, not stealthily like a mist that was cousin to a rain, but violently, as though horrified at a coming disaster—a cold fog, a fog that smelled of storm; and now it had cut off David from all the world, infolding him in its moist gray blanket.

Down below, at the foot of the sand hill, he could hear the lap-lapping of waves; out from behind the fog the frightened voices of vessels; below the Spinnet he could hear two large vessels talking to each other. Spinnet, Dead Man's Bar, and the Gurnet Reef Hollow gave warning by horn and bell, and all the time the world was full of whispering, as though the voices of storm conversed together; this was broken only by the insistent lisping of the waves on the beach. The surface of the sea had begun to heave uneasily, and far off David could hear the whistling of the buoy on the shoals.

There was something cold and secretive in this fog and in the wind that followed at its heels and tore it along—a wind that had not yet ruffled the face of the sea. Something exciting made his blood run faster.

Suddenly he stood still, as though at the command of an unheard voice, and then, drawn as by a magnet, he turned inland and made toward the old halfway house. An encroaching dune had swallowed it; its roof was covered with sand, only the door remained; one still could go in, and one half of a window high up let in at noon an uncertain ray of light. David walked without hesitation and without argument with himself toward the halfway house, as though to keep an appointment made with death itself.

Then there came a sound that made his heart stop for a beat, as though from the fog some one had whispered his name.

"Hello!" he cried, and then again, "Hello!" There was no answer. His voice sounded shockingly loud in the moist, enveloping fog. He stood still, and then the world was silent, except for the whispering of the voices of the storm.

It had got dark swiftly; unseen clouds blanketed the face of the evening sky. Suddenly a whirl of wind parted the fog and David saw for a moment some one sitting near the halfway house, bowed over. He saw that this was a girl and that she was crying. He hurried forward, and then the fog cut him off, and it was not until he was close upon her that he saw her again.

She seemed very young to David, and lonely and helpless in the immensity of the sand and the fog. She was dressed in black, as though in mourning, which was relieved only by a soft white band around her throat; her hair was dark and was pulled straight back from her forehead and done in an elaborate foreign-looking knot; her dark eyes were frightened and swimming in tears.

"Oh!" she said. "You have come." She spoke as though she had expected him and as though he were late.

"Didn't you hear me calling?" said David.

She shook her head, looking at him in a dumb, frightened sort of way.

"What are you doing so far away?" David asked.

She was so little and soft that a surge of pity engulfed him. Then with her puzzled air she said, very distinctly, always looking straight at him, as though he might unravel the mystery for her:

"I do not understand at all why I am here or why I have come." Then she added, "I only knew that I must."

At these words a sensation, almost of fear, ran over David, as though a keen wind had hit him at the roots of his hair.

"Did you get lost?"

"The fog cut me off," she answered.

"Do you often come here?"

There were a few summer cottages not far from Dead Man's Bar. Here the coast rises up sheerly and there is a far view of the sea; a few daring people who can bear isolation have built cottages near the neighboring farms. David assumed that she must have walked from there.

She didn't answer, and he repeated what he had said. She looked away from him, as though trying to see through the fog.

"I like it here," she said. "There is peace here."

She seemed so tired as she spoke that again a surge of pity carried David along like a wave on its crest.

Then for a while she sat there looking at David and he stood looking at her. It seemed to him, as he thought of it afterward, that they had been cut off from time and space—it was like meeting some one in eternity without any of the things of life to divert them from the thought of each other—as though a fog had cut them off from the world and that there remained only their two souls which had met face to face.

He had no more fear of her than if she had been a little girl, though in the presence of all women except Mary Angus he had been dumb, and he feared them all and disliked many, for they lived herded in towns. He was drawn close to this child by an intolerable pity.

"Your trail isn't far from here," he told her. "I'll take you to it."

He walked beside her, always feeling as though he were alone in the world with her, and that because of this he was closer to her than he had ever been to any other human being.

He found the coast road which winds along the shore, uniting one station with the other; the road was covered with grass; the wagon ruts showed dimly. By this time the bay, the elder and wild rose bordering it, were dripping with the fog.

He noticed that she was dressed in black and that she wore a wedding ring, and he found himself asking, "Are you married?" It hurt him to ask this, but he couldn't have told why.

She looked up at him with an expression of dumb suffering.

"I was married. He died—not long ago," she answered.

David wanted to take her in his arms and hush her on his shoulder as though she were a child. He wanted to cry out: "Oh, don't! Oh, don't!" by which he meant, "Oh, don't suffer so!" But he said nothing. It was as if she had told him all the story of her life.

Then she added, "I have a little girl."

David felt glad of that.

They got to the path which led to Dead Man's Bar station to join the road—a quicker path than the one by the beach—leading directly to the little settlement.

"You go here," he said. "Shall I go with you?" As he looked at her he saw she was afraid, but not afraid of the lonely path. What she was afraid of he couldn't tell.

They stood looking at each other questioningly, and there wrapped itself around David the feeling of being in a dream—this wasn't life; this was something else. Then he found himself saying:

"You are coming back again, aren't you?"

"Oh yes!" she said.

"Soon?" David asked.

"Very soon I shall come. Good-by, David."

Again David had the light sensation of cold on his back. He knew she had never seen him before and she had not known his name, and he knew that this was the voice he had heard whispering to him when he had called "Hello!" into the smothering silence of the fog.

He could not forget her. The feeling of pity which she had aroused invaded him and shut away from him the realities of life.

"What has come to me," he thought, "and what is the matter with me?" In all his life he had never seen anything so lonely as that little girl in black sitting beside the smothered halfway house, and the thought of her loneliness was a shadow to all his thoughts; he could not escape it, and he did not want to escape it.

He saw her again three afternoons later on his way to Mary Angus. Instead of taking the beach, he walked along the wagon road. This grown-over track seemed more remote than the dunes themselves. He walked along this track because he had a certainty that she would be there; he had the security as one has that the sun will rise, that somewhere near the halfway house he would find her, and yet, when he saw her walking slowly toward him, again his heart missed a beat. A sense of strangeness enveloped him, as though he were moving in a fatal dream, and again the pity for her tore at his heart. She looked so little, she looked so lonely, it hurt him to see her in this wild place. He wanted to shelter her and defend her.

She came toward him smiling. She carried in her hand some roses; they were strange roses, single, and looking like tropical butterflies with crimson petals and yellow centers, the foliage around was exotic and thick and glossy, and they had a perfume as penetratingly strong as attar of roses.

"You didn't find these here?" asked David.



Drawn by W. H. D. Kerner

"YOUR TRAIL ISN'T FAR FROM HERE. I'LL TAKE YOU TO IT"

"I brought them from home," she answered.

He held out his hand for a rose and she gave one to him. Later he could not remember what they had said. They spoke the fragmentary words of friends, the kind of words one throws into a silence so that it may not become too full of meaning.

They sat down on the crest of a dune on which some green things were growing—bayberry, Mary's flower, and beach grass. One could look at the sea.

"I wonder if these roses would grow if I put them in the sand?" she asked.

"Wild roses grow well out here," he answered. "I have heard my mother say you could slip roses in sand."

She planted them gravely, one after another.

"If it rains they may grow," she said. Then she rose and they walked in silence the short distance that had separated them from the trail leading to Dead Man's Bar.

"I leave you here," she said, and in a moment a clump of elders had hidden her from him.

He went on his way toward Mary's, a confusion in his heart. He felt as though life was asking him something, as though this meeting was a shadow of some portentous thing.

"That's a queer rose you have," said Mary. She took it from him. "I never saw one on the Cape before like it. Where did you find it, David?"

"Out on the dunes."

"Out on the dunes? Do such roses grow on the dunes?"

"A girl on the dunes gave it to me. I don't know who she is." It hurt him intolerably to say that he did not know who she was; it seemed preposterous that he shouldn't know her when she had so impressed herself upon his heart.

Mary's mother came into the room. She had been an inland woman and had made flowers bloom in the little garden around the Light.

"There are no roses like this one in all the Cape," she said. "That's a rose

from a foreign country. I saw one like that one time up in Maine, brought by a man who had been in the China trade."

He wanted to talk about the girl to Mary. He wanted to say he found her lost in the fog and to-day she came to meet him with the rose. But when he came to put it into words, it sound foolish and he could say nothing; so he sat there still, feeling as though he were under the enchantment of a dream.

During the next few days David consciously tried to put the girl from his mind. There was no reason why he should think of her, and yet she was there, forever a background of his thoughts. He turned to Mary for comfort; he clung to her as a child clings to its mother in the dark.

A few days after this as he sat in the Light it seemed to Mary as though he were listening to something outside, as one might listen for a voice calling. He got up.

"Well, I must be going," he said.

"You must be going? Why is that?" asked Mary's mother, for David always stayed until the last moment, giving himself just time to get back to his station. He looked at the two women, dazed.

Mary put her hand on his shoulder. "What is it, David?" she asked. And it seemed to him that the kindness she had in her heart streamed out of her.

"I don't rightly know," he answered. "But I must be off."

Mary's mother looked at them fixedly a moment, and left them standing together.

"David," said Mary, "can't you tell me your trouble? Can't you tell me what's been in your heart, David, and what it is that's been coming between us?"

A longing for his untroubled days and his undivided life surged up around him. He struggled for words. None came to him. What could he tell her? That he loved some one else—a strange girl whose name he did not know? Words

seemed to rob the whole thing of meaning; and yet there it was, some unspoken obligation, something he could not escape, something he had to see through.

Mary bent over and kissed his forehead. "David," she said, "I know one thing. I know I love you forever. And I know your face is turned away from me and you can't tell me why. But I know when you turn your face back to me you'll find me here waiting for you. But, oh, my dear, it's hard that I can't help the trouble that's in your heart." With that she kissed him again.

And with his heart breaking he strode off, not looking behind him. It was as though he had been sucked out of the house on a tide of longing that was neither love nor desire, but which was stronger than either. A desperate homesickness had seized him, the nostalgia of which men die in foreign countries,

He went to the halfway house as a magnet to the pole, secure and content in his knowledge that she would be there waiting for him, a little, lonely, bowed figure who had put on him some mysterious claim. And as he went a fog came up and walked along with him as though it were the inevitable accompaniment of his meeting with her, as though the fog knew his purpose and intended to shut him off from the world with its impenetrable intimacy.

She was sitting as though waiting for him, and for a while they sat near each other, not speaking. David was rocked in his own contentment. His conflict was over; he had no longer feeling of any betrayal. It was as though the door of his heart was opened that led into a secret place which he had never known existed. For a moment he did not struggle with life.

Then, as they sat there, suddenly the fog parted, baring the cold, bright glitter of innumerable stars, infinitely remote. David looked up at them with awe. It seemed as though he had shrunk into nothingness in the presence of the still splendor of the heavens. He

needed the touch of a human being, and he heard himself imploring this unknown girl:

"Let me hold you in my arms for a moment."

"Not now," she whispered to him, putting her hand up in a faint, protesting gesture. She looked at him with a trust. "Not now, but the next time I come." And then she walked away from him slowly. It was as though she stepped off the edge of the world; the fog had blotted her out, and David was left alone.

How long he sat there he could not have told. The immense importance of what had just happened beat on him like an insistent, drenching rain. He was under some enchantment which cut him off from the life he had known. This strange and lonely child needed him, and he had pledged himself to her service.

He got up and went back to the station. Throughout the long walk his thoughts went around in the treadmill.

His life had been unified, complete, and now he had been invaded by this strange love from the outside; it assailed him like an outside force, asking something of him. So his undivided life was now divided. His heart lay torn in two before him. It was as though he were divided into two persons, one plunged deep into the inexplicable thing which had befallen him, and the other his usual self, alive to every whisper of the wind. He sensed storm in the air; everything spoke of storm. Disaster was brewing, disaster was coming upon the breath of the lifting wind. There were vessels behind the blanket of fog, vessels below the brim of the horizon fated to destruction.

All through his sleep he felt the storm rising. By morning the breakers were thundering on the beach, driven by the wind that has no check to it; it sweeps clear across the ocean from Spain to America. And yet the fog persisted; the wind drove the fog before it and there was more fog; it could not drive it

clear. Behind the fog came the tumultuous talking of frightened vessels.

Mixed in David's mind was the thought of Mary and the thought of the girl in the halfway house. It was so inexplicable that it would not give him rest, a mystery clamoring to be solved, while always below the surface of his thoughts there was the homesickness which she had aroused in him.

This became so unbearable that late in the afternoon he got into his oilskins and went to the halfway house, knowing beforehand that it was impossible she should be there. It looked more lonely than ever, smothered over with sand. He went within to shelter himself from the smiting rain and from the howling cruelty of the wind. It was like a tomb, a grave of hope. There was the place where the stove had been, and still a bench and a locker for coal and wood. The place stifled him and he plowed back to the station again. His thoughts whirled through his mind like leaves before a storm.

By nightfall the storm had become a tempest, and he went to bed with the captain's voice in his ears:

"Better get what sleep we can; like as not we'll be turned out before morning."

He sank instantly into profound sleep, and it seemed that no time had passed before he heard the alarm. With the sleep still heavy upon him he struggled into his clothes and out with the lifeboat. A vessel had gone ashore on the bar. The fog was still drifting in; one could barely make out the distress signal. A sense of apprehension gripped him. He heard them discuss whether it would be possible to launch the boat. He said, aloud:

"We'll be too late if we don't hurry! We'll be too late!"

Then he heard the captain call out, "We'll have to try the lifeboat!" But the fog had shut down again, and they launched the boat as if by a miracle. They struggled outward over the cruel mountains of dark water.

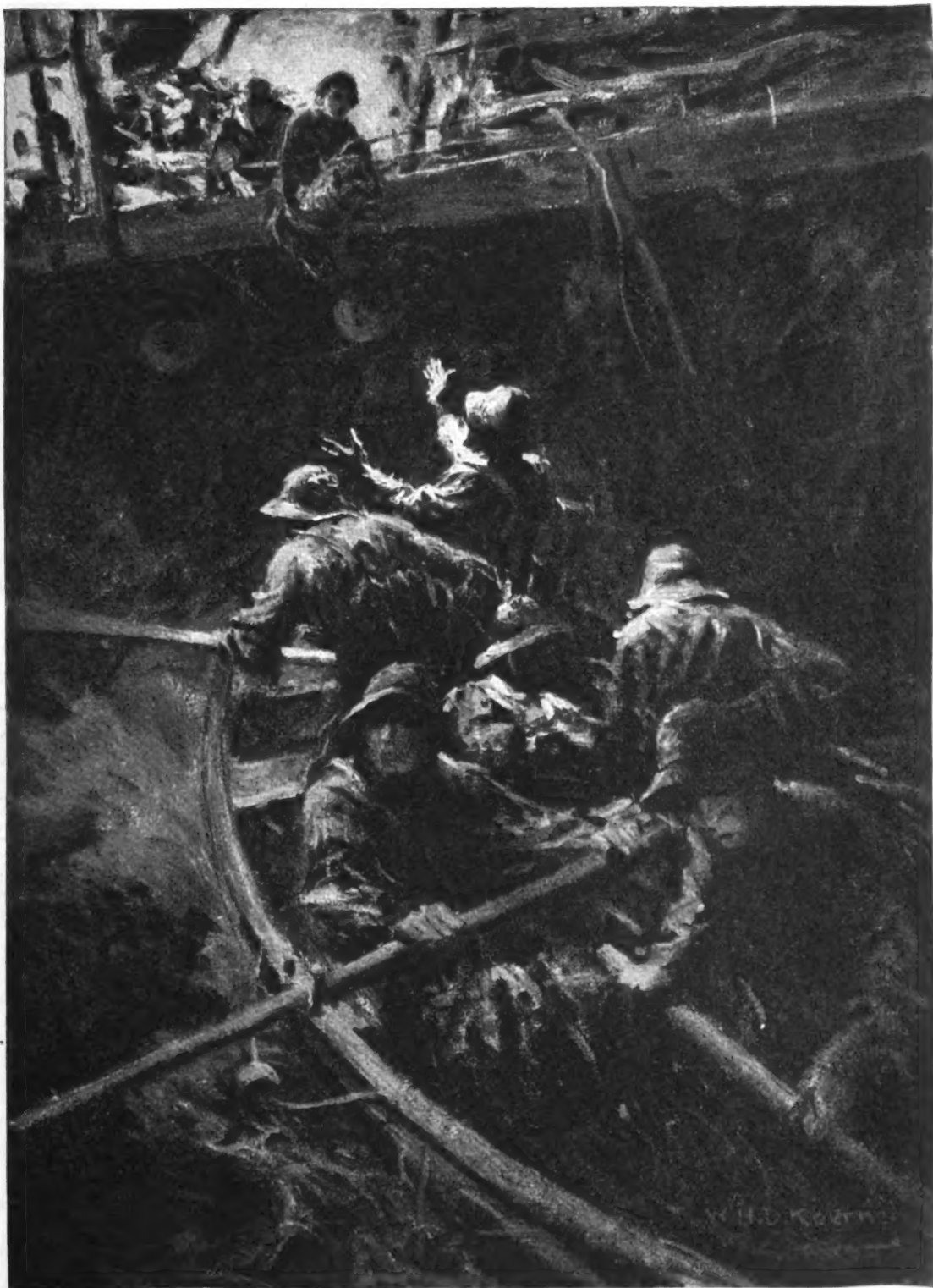
A torch like a red eye was flaring from the deck of the vessel. The lifeboat toiled up the steep, glassy side of a wave. Then he thought he heard his name, "David!" and then again, "David!" He felt the familiar sensation of cold, as though a wind had been blowing at the roots of his hair. Again he fought doggedly with the cruel fury of the waves, toiling toward the torch's red eye. A whirl of wind parted the fog and on the deck of the reeling vessel he thought he saw a frightened figure of a girl dressed in black.

A terror gripped him, for it was the little bowed figure he knew so well, frightened and lonely, but no more frightened and no more lonely than he had seen her at the halfway house. She stood there with her puzzled air, as if waiting for the next move of fate, as though she dumbly expected some new disaster which never failed her. In her arms she held a little girl.

With a baby in her arms she should be the first to enter the boat. They made alongside of the vessel's lee and held themselves there with difficulty, the boat rising and falling on the crest of the greedy waves. She handed the child to David, and her lips formed some word inaudible to him in the storm. He saw plainly her face lit up by the torch; plainly he saw a flaming, startled recognition in her eyes, a glad recognition. Then the word was given her to jump, and she jumped and missed and the water closed over her head. Then David saw a glimpse of her white face as she was swept down by the onrushing seas—and in a moment he was after her. He had her in his arms; then darkness enshrouded him as he battled toward the lifeboat.

The next hour was blank to David. He retained consciousness and nothing more. How they got ashore he could not remember. He had only a vague memory of a limp figure at the bottom of the boat, his own exhaustion, and of a child's voice amid the storm.

His next memory was the life-saving



Drawn by W. H. D. Koerner

SHE HANDED THE CHILD TO DAVID, AND HER LIPS FORMED SOME WORD

station. She lay there less lonely now than she had seemed to him when he had first seen her there sitting with bowed head in the smothering immensity of the fog. The men and women grouped themselves around her pityingly; they were foreigners; some spoke English. The wrecked vessel was a bark twenty days from Fayal.

Then a woman spoke to the captain of the station:

"She was always worrying about her baby. She used to sit and look out to sea, as if wondering what would happen to her. She seemed to know—"

"Who are her relatives?" the captain asked. "Who knows about her?"

"She had none. Her husband was dead. She was coming here to join her brother; just before she sailed she heard that he, also, had died—so, not knowing what to do, she came anyway."

There was silence. Then one of the women asked, "What will become of the child?"

David had stood there listening to them, as though from a great distance, and then suddenly the amazing meaning of it swept over him. He went forward and picked the baby up.

"It is mine," he said. She clung to him and put her face close to his, as

though she knew him. "I'll take it to Mary Angus."

You may say such things can't happen. But there are stranger legends than these that come from the Graveyard of the Atlantic; and if you don't believe this you may go to Gurnet Reef station and they will tell you about it, and you can see Assunta Flores with her foreign eyes and her heavy dark hair, and you can see Mary Angus, whom she calls mother. And then if you go up to the old halfway house by the wagon track and climb the dune above you will find growing there clumps of rose bushes which in their season bloom with strange, exotic flowers. You can go, if you like, and see at Spinet Rock the same flower that Mary's mother slipped into the sand and which has flourished.

Then, if you like, you can explain it all by coincidence—that some lonely girl strayed from the cottages to talk to David on the dunes, and that she brought him the roses. But if you have been much on the outside shore you will not make your explanation chime with reason, because you will know that the reason of man is but a puny measure for creation's immensity.

ESCAPE

BY EDITH M. THOMAS

UNRECKONED moments of a high delight
 I, in a vivid childhood, oftentimes knew,
 But of the cause could nothing tell aright
 Why with the winds of Joy my spirits flew.
 My critics sighed and shook the doubtful head.
 "You are beside yourself," they chastening said.

But later I this self could chasten so,
 Its ecstasies were masked to casual eyes.
 Now on my way I unmolested go,
 And even entertain the fine surmise
 That those beside themselves are but outside—
 Set free, the while, in regions fair and wide.